

Thurman James Starker

1890-1983

Thurman James Starker, better known as “T.J.” to his friends and “Prof” to the three generations of forestry students he taught, was a noted educator, forester, and civic leader in Oregon. He was among the first to recognize the value of second-growth Douglas fir and the application of intensive forest management.

T.J. was born in Grenola, Kansas, on July 14, 1890. He grew up in Burlington, Iowa, where his father, Otto Starker, was a construction contractor. In 1907, the Starker family moved to Portland, Oregon, where Otto continued his construction business. Young T.J. worked on his father’s construction crews and graduated from Portland High School in 1908.

That summer, he worked for the United States Forest Service in the State of Washington on the Columbia National Forest (now the Gifford Pinchot National Forest), cruising the extensive forests of that area.

In the fall of 1908, T.J. enrolled at Oregon Agricultural College (now Oregon State University) at Corvallis. He entered the new forestry program as a sophomore. He completed three years of studies in two years, graduating as one of four professional foresters with the first graduating class from the forestry program in 1910.

Encouraged by George Peavy, head of the forestry program, T.J. enrolled at the University of Michigan for his master’s degree in forestry. He received his Master of Science Degree in Forestry in 1912.

As he completed his studies at the University of Michigan, he was offered a job with the U.S. Forest Service to work on the Whitman National Forest in northeast Oregon.

In this job, T. J. worked as a forest examiner and was headquartered at Sumpter, Oregon. While there, he married his high school sweetheart, Margaret Ostrander. In 1915, he was transferred to the Portland office of the Forest Service. Here, he was assigned to the Spruce Production Division, responsible for obtaining Sitka spruce from the coastal forests of Oregon and Washington to make airplanes as the nation prepared for World War I.

In 1917, T.J. left the Forest Service for a job as Traveling Secretary and Manager of the Box Bureau for the Western Pine Manufacturers Association.

A son, Bruce, was born to T.J. and Margaret in 1918, and two years later, their daughter, Jean, was born.

After working for the Western Pine Manufacturing Association for five years, T.J. was offered a teaching position at Oregon Agricultural College by George Peavy, now dean of the School of Forestry. He accepted the position of assistant professor after visiting the campus. He taught silviculture, forest management, wood identification, and forest finance. A special course was added, aimed at preparing forestry graduates for passing the forest assistant written examination required to gain employment with the Forest Service.

During the summers for the next several years, T.J. would leave his teaching job and work either for the Forest Service or for the private forest industry. In 1923, T.J. and his family spent the summer living at the south end of Spirit Lake near Mount St. Helens in the State of Washington. He was the forester in charge of recreation at this popular summer vacation area and also worked as the liaison forester between the local ranger district and the Portland office.

Another summer, T.J. worked for the Northwest Blower Kiln Company to learn the dry kiln business for a class that he would teach the following fall. T.J. also built houses in the Corvallis area during these summers.

In 1930, T.J. took a year of sabbatical leave to take classes and teach forestry at Pennsylvania State College.

While teaching at Oregon Agricultural College, renamed Oregon State College by this time, T.J. assisted in selecting and acquiring the first lands that became the McDonald Forest and Peavy Arboretum. The forest became the outdoor laboratory for forestry students, just a short drive from their classrooms on campus. The Arboretum, located next to the Forest, became an area to observe and study many varieties of forest tree species.

T.J. also began several on-going forest research experimental studies, including a “post farm” and a study of various races of ponderosa pine planted on the McDonald Forest.

Throughout his teaching career, T.J. had urged his forestry students to seriously consider the merits of second-growth Douglas fir. He foresaw that the old-growth forests would eventually be harvested and that the younger, more vigorous growing second-growth forests would have to fill the demand for wood. Many of these stands could reach harvestable size in 25 years, growing on the productive soil of western Oregon. More important, these forests were still not considered valuable at that time and could be acquired as tax-delinquent lands at a very reasonable price from counties that had foreclosed on the land.

T.J. always stressed four key points when telling his students how they should buy these lands:

1. The land should be well stocked with second-growth Douglas fir.
2. There should be no snags on the land.
3. Neighboring landowners should not be known to burn their lands for improved grazing or hunting.
4. Above all, a buyer should not pay more than \$5 an acre for the lands.

In 1936, T.J. finally “put his money where his mouth was” and purchased 100 acres on the north side of Mary’s Peak in the Coast Range west of Corvallis. From then on, he continued to purchase tracts of second-growth Douglas fir if they met all of his four key points.

In 1942, T.J. took an “extended leave” from his teaching position at Oregon State College to manage his forest property and an ornamental nursery that he had acquired. Four years later, his son, Bruce, joined him in managing these lands. T.J. and Bruce continued to add to the timberland holdings by carefully selecting available lands.

T.J. also developed other business interests. Among them were acquiring and developing commercial and residential property in the Corvallis area. In partnership with several local businessmen he started Peak Plywood to manufacture veneer. Other business interests in the wood products industry include the Dog Face Lumber Company and the Beaver Cabinet Works. Several residential subdivisions were also developed.

In October, 1964, T.J.’s wife, Margaret, died unexpectedly after a short illness. T.J. continued to manage his forest property, always stressing the importance of regeneration of timberland. In 1968, he semi-retired from the day-to-day management responsibilities. Bruce assumed these responsibilities, but continued to involve T.J. in major decisions and plans.

In 1969, T.J. was appointed by Governor Tom McCall to the Oregon State Board of Forestry, the policy-making board of citizens responsible for state and private forestry in Oregon, and for influencing federal forest management in the state, as well. He represented the forest industry in his area for seven years on the board. His main concerns while on the board were maintaining a good forest fire protection system in the state, keeping an adequate emergency fire cost fund for financing control of major forest fires, and promoting fertilization on the Tillamook State Forest, formerly the Tillamook Burn.

A formal partnership, called Starker Forests, was formed by T.J. in 1971 with Bruce; Bruce’s wife, Betty; and their two sons, Bond and Barte.

In July, 1975, a tragic airplane accident claimed the life of Bruce. After the accident, Bond, T.J.’s older grandson, was named managing partner of Starker Forests.

Six years later, in 1981, Starker Forests, Inc. was formed with T.J. as chairman of the board, Bond as president, Barte as executive vice president and Betty as executive secretary.

Throughout his life, T.J. was always active in his community, Oregon State University, the forestry profession, in addition to many other interests. He served on three draft boards, the first in Portland as a legal advisor to draftees during World War I., and later during World War II and the Korean Conflict as a Corvallis resident.

He served on the Corvallis School Board from 1936 to 1943. In 1952, he was chairman of the committee to raise funds for Good Samaritan Hospital and received the First Citizen of Corvallis award. For eight years, he served on the Corvallis Park Board and was instrumental in acquiring land for Avery Park, the city's major recreation area. He also served on the Benton County Park Board from 1951 to 1975, and was a member and director of the Oregon Roadside Council.

In 1977, he was made an honorary life member of the Corvallis Chamber of Commerce. For 50 years, he was an active member of the Corvallis Lions Club. The 4-H Foundation dedicated the T.J. Starker Swimming Pool at the 4-H Center near Salem in 1981 to honor his support of the center.

T.J. was also widely acclaimed for his wise, joshing, and informative "readatorials" in the Corvallis Gazette-Times that he wrote for over 30 years.

Starting with his years as a student, later as a professor, and finally, as an alumni, T.J. was continually involved with Oregon State University. He was a member of the OSU Foundation, the OSU Trustees, and the OSU Presidents Club. He was an active member of the OSU Forestry Alumni Association and sought many opportunities

to visit the school and to make time to speak to forestry classes. In 1971, he received the OSU Distinguished Service Award. The citation read in part "practiced what he preached to his students about owning and wisely managing forest lands...an Oregon Paul Bunyan without question."

Within the forestry profession, T.J. was elected as a member of Xi Sigma Pi, national forestry scholastic fraternity, in 1922. He was an active member of the Society of American Foresters and was elected a Fellow in 1981. He served on the Board of Trustees for the Industrial Forestry Association for 13 years. He received numerous tree farmer awards during his lifetime, but was particularly pleased to twice win the "Great Tree Race" for growing the longest leader on a Douglas fir tree.

T.J. died on March 10, 1983 in Corvallis. He left a legacy of 52,000 acres of Starker forests, wisely managed for the present and the future.

A memorial resolution honoring the lifetime contributions of T.J. Starker was passed by the Oregon State Legislature in appreciation for his many civic activities and his service to his profession.